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AUTHOR Zobairi, Nillofur; Gulley, Beverly
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ABSTRACT

The importance of oral storytelling for children is examined. Inital discussion focuses on: (1) the purpose and benefits of storytelling; (2) the importance of storytelling in the early childhood setting; (3) development of language skills, including oral communication, nonverbal communication, and mastery over story material and story language; (4) the fostering of listening skills; (5) stimulation of imagination and creativity; and (6) development of social and other personal skills. The discussion of storytelling in the classroom extensively explores the topics of the teacher as storyteller and the child as storyteller. Guidelines for teachers are included in the discussion. (RH)

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The Told Tale: Oral Storytelling and the Young Child

Nillofur Zobairi and Beverly Gulley

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

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Abstract

The importance of oral storytelling for children is examined. Storytelling influences language, listening, creative, and personal-social skills, and should be an essential element of well-rounded language arts programs. The roles of the teacher and the child in the storytelling context are also considered.

The Told Tale: Oral Storytelling and the Young Child

"The tales you hear in your cradle," states a character in Robin McKinley's (1978) Beauty, "stay with you whether you will or nay." Throughout history, listening to stories has been part of childhood's fascination. Today, hearing stories at home and at school introduces children to literature, and teaches them to delight in books.

A growing body of research emphasizes the need to read to children from an early age (Teale, 1984; Schickedanz, 1986). Stimulated and challenged by books, children develop an early understanding of print, its functions, and its potential. Because of solid research and the availability of excellent books for children, reliance on written rather than told literature is increasing in schools and homes today.

While there is little doubt about the value of reading to children, educators should be aware of the numerous benefits of storytelling that are not necessarily replaced by storyreading. In fact, reading, telling, and writing stories should all be part of a working language arts program, and the child's literacy environment should be expanded to reinstate the ancient art of storytelling which, today, is often subordinated to other arts in language programs.

Storytelling: Purpose and Benefits

Teachers of young children need to ask some questions about storytelling. What is storytelling? What are the benefits of storytelling as a regular part of the curriculum? What are the storytelling roles of teacher and child in the early childhood setting?

According to Pellowski (1977), storytelling is "the art or craft of narration of stories in verse and/or prose." It is "a communication" requiring "imagination and wisdom" (Rosen, 1986). The National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling emphasizes the "mental and emotional images" which meet "story content with audience needs and environment" (Livo & Rietz, 1987).

Storytelling succeeds in communicating because it delves deeply into the personal and universal human experience expressed in folklore and literature and because, historically, it is a shared art and a shared happening. Storytelling, say Briggs and Wagner (1977), is "an elemental social process." As such, its implications for the learning environment are tremendous.

Reading to children can be very satisfying for both reader and listener, and assists significantly in literacy development. Telling stories to children is also very satisfactory, and involves a variety of benefits, such as voice cultivation, oral

and nonverbal communication, concentrated listening, and intimate social interaction.

Oral communication, listening, responding, and directly interacting are the foundations of the storytelling event and enhance its social-personal quality. Spoken tales convey images through voice, words, gestures, and facial expressions. During the telling, the storyteller is not simply the narrator: he/she is "character, actions, noises, motions, and other shapes within the story" (Livo & Rietz, 1986).

Storytelling is immediate, spontaneous, and intimate. It presupposes a physically present creator-teller, and physically present listener-participants who, because of their rapport with the teller, influence and shape the way the story goes during each telling.

The Importance of Storytelling in the Early Childhood Setting

Telling stories to young children provides entertainment and fulfills developmental goals of early childhood education. Regular storytelling by both teacher and children (a) stimulates oral language communication; (b) teaches mastery over body movement and expressiveness; (c) provides modelling for organizing and structuring story material and language; (d) develops and sharpens listening skills; (e) assists the growth of the imagination and creativity; and, (f) enhances personal and social skills.

Development of Language Skills

Story is steeped in language, and constant exposure to oral storytelling helps young children develop several language skills. Storytelling focuses on the spoken word and its manipulation. It stimulates oral communication, gives children a feel for words, and provides them with a vocabulary beyond their reading capacity, but which aids them in reading later on (Frick, 1986).

Oral communication. A key goal of early childhood education is to help children communicate effectively. Oral communication is basic to storytelling: the successful storyteller is fluent, with a rich, expressive repertoire of words and images. Young children demand the security of familiar stories and language, listening to the same tale over and over again, growing comfortable with known words and phrases, the repetition of which gives them a sense of ownership. At the same time, children can be gradually introduced to new stories and new aspects of languaging, so that their vocabulary and grasp of style is stretched, but painlessly. They can also be shown how characters, theme, and action come to life through vibrant, living words.

When adults tell children stories, children are encouraged to tell stories also, using the models to which they are exposed. Thus, regular time set aside for sharing stories with children and for allowing children to share their stories with each other,

fosters both oral communication and a sense of shaping communication into an artistic creation.

Nonverbal communication. Language is both verbal and nonverbal. Through oral storytelling children learn to recognize the uses of body movement and rhythm, facial expression, and gesture. They learn that posture can express meaning, and that direct eye contact or the lack of it can say many things.

Mastery over story material and story language. Storytelling teaches children that language can be manipulated and organized, and that experiences -- the raw material of story -- can be molded into a particular form for presentation. Telling stories regularly exposes children to the "rules" of story pertaining to beginnings and endings, character description, setting, and sequencing (Brown, 1977; Pradl, 1979; Hough, Nurss, & Wood, 1987). Children apply these rules when they retell stories or create new ones. In fact, children who are unaware of story structure tell "fractured stories" (Morrow, 1985) lacking organization, sequence, and other essential story elements.

Even very young children who are exposed to storytelling know the characteristics of story (Applebee, 1979). By the age of two-and-one-half, these children can tell stories with approximately 30 words, three episodes, and two characters. By the age of five, children's stories are three times longer, and involve more characters and episodes. Applebee maintains that

through storytelling children gain mastery over material and language by imposing structure, at first loosely, but then with increasing control. Achieving such manipulative control provides satisfaction and ownership, and helps children make sense of the world.

Concentrating on spoken language fosters comprehension by enhancing the ability to infer and predict (Frick, 1986). Prediction of syntax and inference of meaning encourage fluency and greater confidence in taking risks. Moreover, the manipulation and organization of story promotes problem-solving skills which positively influence reading skills at a later age. Storytelling also provides practice for verb past tense use and sentence structuring (Brown, 1977; Jensen, 1985).

Fostering Listening Skills

Movies, television, video and the print around us make this a predominantly visual age. Auditory media such as radio and tape may foster "lazy" or passive listening requiring little concentration on language or content. As a result, American children today are poor listeners (Briggs & Wagner, 1979). Yet educators agree that effective listening is essential to communication and comprehension. Storytelling can promote listening skills, because the special relationship between storyteller and audience presupposes active listening for participation and retelling -- both enjoyed by young children.

In early "oral" societies, listener involvement was crucial to the storytelling event. In the modern classroom children can learn to listen, and to participate through chants, refrains, and songs which contribute directly to the event. Active listening promotes comprehension, meaningful self-expression, and participation at appropriate points in the story. Good listeners grasp the "shape" of the story and transform it into their own experience. They render heard stories into retellings utilizing effective strategies and devices. Listening to stories is the best way to learn to tell new stories, and new ways to tell old ones (Pellowski, 1977).

Stimulation of Imagination and Creativity

Through listening to stories, children learn to visualize without visual aids, although storytelling often employs these, especially for young children. The "ability to visualize, to fantasize, is the basis of creative imagination" (Baker & Greene, 1977). It helps children develop empathy and insights into the motives and actions of others and respond to the sounds and vivid pictures. This is an active process, one of feeling, "seeing" through the senses, reflecting, and creating.

Listening to stories encourages children to create and present their own stories. Exposure to story shows them how their own experiences and feelings, like those of story characters, can

be shaped into something beautiful and meaningful to be shared with others.

Development of Social-Personal Skills

Storytelling is both a social and a personal literacy event. A strong sense of closeness and "positive rapport" is quickly established, with instant feedback to the actual teller. Direct messages back and forth between teller and listeners enlivens the social contact.

Perhaps the richest material for storytelling is derived from folktales and traditional stories, which express social and personal truths and provide immense emotional and intellectual satisfaction. Folktales were originally oral, and are more conducive to the oral mode even today. They lend themselves to the development of sympathy and empathy which young children, who are egocentric, need to acquire. Folktales help children feel the need for social existence, cooperation, and justice, while letting them identify with individual heroes.

Storytelling in the Classroom

Storytelling has long been recognized as personally and educationally beneficial to young children. It was advocated by the Kindergarten Teachers' Group of the National Education Association, and by educators such as Froebel, Dewey, and Montessori. However, Alvey (cited in Pellowski, 1977) found that teachers themselves have not been very zealous in promoting

storytelling in their classrooms. In fact, of the four professional groups which have traditionally used story with young children -- teachers, librarians, religious educators, and recreational directors -- teachers make the least use of storytelling. This could be because of lack of elasticity in formal school systems, and the need for time to create an appropriate atmosphere and rapport between teller and listeners. Perhaps storytelling is less successful in classrooms because it becomes associated with expectations and pressures to learn, interpret, explain, rationalize, and justify.

In a back-to-basics, highly pressurized age, some teachers may feel that stories can be presented more usefully through books. The value of picture and storybooks is immense. However, their use should be complemented by adequate teacher/child storytelling, which fulfills important educational, developmental, and aesthetic purposes in the classroom.

The Teacher as Storyteller

Teacher preparation programs emphasize literacy development and provide children's literature courses, but do not always prepare students for storytelling as an oral activity. As a result teachers, especially beginning ones, feel more comfortable reading to groups or individual children from the vast and rich array of children's books. And so "read me a story!" is more often heard from children than "tell me/us a story!"

Teachers who decide to make storytelling a regular part of their program need to prepare themselves for the undertaking. Some preparatory measures are:

1. Constantly add suitable stories to the existing repertoire of favorites.

2. Learn essential features, but avoid memorizing the entire tale. Be prepared to adapt and recreate.

3. Model good listening behavior for children.

4. Experiment with seating arrangements to see which best suits a particular group.

5. Practice voice projection and manipulation techniques. Voice is one of the most important factors in storytelling. Padraic Colum (1968) felt that voice quality heightens impact, and helps listeners remember.

6. Practice good storytelling devices, content delivery, and appropriate gestures and movements, but be careful not to sacrifice spontaneity.

7. Decide whether visual aids are necessary. Inappropriate aids and props are distracting, but young children do enjoy some. An accomplished storyteller like Hans Christian Anderson used cut-outs to enliven his storytellings. Coody (1979) suggests that if flannelboards or other materials are utilized, they should be left for children to manipulate after the story is over. In this

way oral language stimulation occurs as children create their own versions of the story.

8. Establish direct eye contact with children, as this is one of the outstanding characteristics of storytelling.

A good storytelling requires careful story selection. The teacher should consider the following points:

1. Is the story enjoyable for the storyteller? A teller who does not enjoy a tale is not likely to render it well.

2. Is the story appropriate for the needs, comprehension level, and age of the children? An appropriate story for toddlers should be short to fit short attention spans, and fast-paced, with brief, catchy beginnings and endings, quick action and movement, only a few characters, direct and simple plot, repetitions, and vocabulary the child can easily understand and assimilate.

Stories for toddlers may be in the form of short poems -- nursery and Mother Goose rhymes make excellent stories, with plot, character, and simple but rhythmic language patterns suitable for the oral tale. "A Mother Goose rhyme is a minidrama," state Baker and Greene (1977). Finger play stories such as "This Little Piggy," and "Two Little Blackbirds" also absorb young children, and allow the teller to be creative.

Stories for preschoolers can be slightly longer, with more characters and fewer visual aids. Mother Goose rhymes such as "Mary Had a Little Lamb," and "Hickory, Dickory Dock," with

conflict, character, action, and climax are still appropriate. Simple folk tales like "The Three Bears," "The Three Pigs" and "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" fascinate children between three to five years: at this age children enjoy a mixture of reality and fantasy. Folktales also provide an excellent sense of story conventions and structure, simple and satisfying imagery, and a feeling for continuity and universality.

Characteristics of children at various ages and stages should be kept in mind. For example, from three to five years of age children have a brief attention span, undergo rapid language development, are curious and egocentric, have a developing imagination and an imperfect sense of time. They need to feel secure but begin to assert their independence. They need to have problems resolved satisfactorily. The content, themes, and format of stories should reflect these needs and interests.

3. Is the story appropriate for the amount of time available? Because of the peculiar situation of the classroom, the teacher must consider how quickly the scene can be set, and how much time the telling and participation will actually take. Ample time for follow-up activities should also be considered.

4. Does the story depend too heavily on visual aids and props, or is the telling itself the central element? For some stories accessories like puppets, dolls, or flannelboard may be used, but should not detract from the story itself.

5. Does the story really lend itself to an oral telling? Some stories are definitely better read aloud than told. Folktales and fables, on the other hand, are wonderful oral tales.

A lot of time, effort, and enthusiasm goes into selecting the right story for the right group at the right time. Not only must the teacher know children's literature well, but must be able to adapt various kinds of story to the children's level and delve into personal experience, since story can emanate from many sources.

The Child as Storyteller

A storytelling program which aims at developing the language, listening, creative, and social skills of young children should allow ample time for children to tell stories. They may begin by retelling familiar tales. Retelling facilitates oral language use, comprehension, role playing skills, and social interaction (Morrow, 1979; 1985). In her retelling research, Morrow found that kindergarten and nursery school teachers provide few opportunities for children to retell stories to each other. Yet the child who hears good stories and is given the chance to retell them learns to practice recall and discrimination. Children soon learn the storyteller's task of mapping, constructing and, at a later stage, tailoring and predicting, provided a good teacher model is before them.

There are several ways to elicit child storytelling. Hough, Nurss, and Wood (1987) indicate that some strategies may be more effective than others. They found that when K-3 children told a story about a single busy picture, their vocabulary was relatively small and bounded by objects and details within the picture. The results were more like lists than stories. When children told a story using an eight-page wordless picture book, their vocabulary was again limited to brief descriptions, although the narrative structures were more "mature" than in the case of single pictures. Time markers, important to a sense of story, were seldom used. However, when just asked to tell a story, children were creative, introduced imaginary characters, employed story structure with beginnings, endings, and sequence, although the plots were not always clear. Some were modifications of familiar tales, but often with innovations. It seems that when children tell their own stories, they are less bound by external stimuli.

As storyteller, the child acquires confidence, self-esteem, and several essential skills which influence later learning, and enhance personal and social development. The key is to provide plenty of time and opportunity for storytelling and storylistening by both teacher and child. The teacher who tells stories models storytelling techniques and use of story language and grammar. The teacher who listens to children's stories models good listening and participation behavior.

Summary

Historically, storytelling has been an activity shared by people of all ages. In our print-oriented society it tends to be relegated to the realm of childhood, but even young children are often deprived of storytelling in its truest sense. Yet storytelling not only entertains: It helps children develop linguistic, cognitive, listening, creative, personal and social skills and should, therefore, not be underrated in the early childhood classroom. In fact, a well-rounded curriculum should provide equal time for storytelling and other language/literacy activities.

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